

Remember the Sabbath

First in a Summer Sermon Series ~ Sabbath Living

July 1, 2007

Genesis 1:1 - 2:3

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

³Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” ⁷So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. ¹²The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, ¹⁵and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. ¹⁶God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁸to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” ²¹So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. ²²God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” ²³And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. ²⁵God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” ²⁷So God created humankind in God’s image, in the image of God God created them; male and female God created them. ²⁸God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

²⁹God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.

³¹God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

²Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ²And on the seventh day God finished the work that God had done, and God rested on the seventh day from all the work that God had done. ³So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that God had done in creation.

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(I am indebted to Wayne Muller and his book *Sabbath – finding rest, renewal and delight in our busy lives* for his insights, wisdom and practical suggestions that have inspired this summer sermon series on Sabbath Living.)

It’s summertime in New England! And what I’ve learned over these many years of ministry is that in New England, summertime is equated with Sabbath time. Even the director of last week’s Sounds of the Risen Son Youth Choir from Pasadena, CA commented that it was hard to find churches that would receive them during the week because it was “summer in New England” and folks just wouldn’t come out to church on a week night during the summer. “Where do people go?” she asked me. “Oh, no where in particular,” I replied. “It’s just part of the New England ethos. Summertime seems to give everyone permission to stay away from church.” “That’s sure different than the south or mid west” she offered. “You bet!” was all I could say.

Early on in my ministry I resented everyone disappearing for the summer. The pews were half empty. Folks were at the beach or on the golf course or at their summer cottage instead of in the sanctuary on Sunday mornings. But as I grew older, I grew wiser and recognized that it’s important for New Englanders to equate summertime with Sabbath time because we are too often obsessed with the Puritan work ethic that places too much credit on productivity and efficiency and not enough emphasis on rest and re-creation, on being rather than doing. Most of us need to attend to a better balance of leisure and work, of being and doing.

And hence, this summer sermon series on Sabbath Living – reclaiming the Sabbath in a variety of ways. Over the summer, we will explore the meaning of Sabbath living and find ways to make ordinary time extraordinary time with God.

Some of you are better at Sabbath living than others. Those of us who are more naturally “do-ers” than “be-ers” will take our cues from those of you who can more naturally “be” than “do.” I hope throughout the summer that you will share your thoughts and your experiences so that we can make this an interactive sermon series and we can learn from each other about Sabbath living.

Sabbath. What comes to mind for you when you hear that word?

Let’s turn to scripture for the origin of Sabbath living. The first Genesis creation narrative recounts that “on the seventh day God finished the work that God had done, and God rested on the seventh day from all the work that God had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that God had done in creation.” And thus the Sabbath was created. It has been said that “Until the Sabbath, creation was unfinished.” The Sabbath doesn’t happen “after” God finishes with creation. No, the Sabbath is part of creation. It is the final act of creation. It completes creation.

In his book on Sabbath, Wayne Muller points out that it was on the seventh day of creation that God created *menuha*, which in Hebrew is translated tranquility, serenity, peace, and repose – rest, in the deepest possible sense of fertile, healing stillness. The seventh day wasn't when an exhausted God took time off and rested. No, the seventh day provided the day for God to create serenity, peace, and healing rest. In the book of Exodus, we read, "In six days God made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day God rested and was refreshed." The word "refreshed," *vaiynafesh* in Hebrew, literally means, "and God *exhaled*." (pp. 36 – 37, *Sabbath*, Muller.) So the creation of the world was like the life-quickening inhale; and Sabbath is the exhale. Thus, in the beginning, all creation moves with the rhythm of the inhale and the exhale. Without the Sabbath exhale, the life-giving inhale is impossible.

Breathe with me for a moment. Experience the life giving, creating intake of your breath and then feel the rest, the tranquility, the peace of the exhale. So often when we need a moment of Sabbath in our busy day, being aware of our breath calms us, centers us, and puts us in touch with our Creator God. At times we choose to use our breath as a prayer. At other times it is enough to be mindful of the intake and the exhale of our breathing rhythm. Breathe.

It is interesting to note that most spiritual traditions celebrate some form of Sabbath practice. Before the Hebrews, the Babylonians celebrated a lunar Sabbath. Buddhists use a lunar Sabbath – on the new, full, and quarter moons – as a day for the monks and lay people to feast together, mediate, reflect on the dharma, and recite the fundamental precepts of spiritual practice. Christians and Muslims celebrate their Sabbath days on Sunday and Friday respectively, both using sacred time to focus their heart's attention on spiritual matters, and to gather together to celebrate their love for one another and for their neighbor.

The Jewish Sabbath became crucial when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 C. E. When the Jews were in exile, the Sabbath became their temple, their sanctuary in time. It became the spiritual glue that held the people together. Over time, the Hebrew people began to make lists of acts that were prohibited on the Sabbath – acts traditionally associated with the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Tasks such as sowing, plowing, reaping, threshing and winnowing are prohibited, as are grinding, sifting, kneading, and baking. Spinning and weaving, hunting and slaughtering, building, hammering, and transporting are among the prohibitions. Meanwhile, deep permission was given for other things to happen. When we cease our daily labor, other things – love, friendship, prayer, touch, singing, rest – are born into Sabbath time. (Muller, pp. 29 – 30)

We Christians inherited our Jewish forbears understanding of Sabbath. When you were growing up, what are some of the restrictions that you remember on the Sabbath? And what are some of the restorative, renewing memories that you have about the Sabbath?

The God who made the Sabbath is not a cranky schoolmaster, always forbidding and making rules which are hard to keep. The Sabbath commandment comes from a kind, wise teacher who created the Sabbath so that we, like the Creator, could delight in and appreciate all that has been and continues to be created. It is as if God speaks to us and says "Let me make life a little easier for you. If you work all week and forget to rest, you will become brittle and hard, and lose your sense of joy. Forgetting the Sabbath is like forgetting to unwrap the best gift under the tree. So I give you this commandment. Honor the Sabbath. Remember to rest. This is not a life-style suggestion, this is a commandment. It is as important as not stealing, not murdering, or not lying. Remember to play and bless and eat with those you love and take comfort, easy and long, in this gift of sacred rest." (Muller, p. 32)

Understanding the history and intention and tradition of the Sabbath is critical before we begin applying it to our daily lives. For 21st century Christians, the challenge is in finding God's rhythm of doing and being. For many, it cannot be restricted to the first day of the week. Let's face it, our Sunday Sabbath faces far too many challenges. Work, family obligations, weekend weddings, recitals, sports, reunions, celebrations and any number of occasions compromise a full day of Sunday Sabbath.

And so I suggest that this summer we explore Sabbath living and find ways to compliment our busy life styles with daily moments of Sabbath time. Sabbath living prevents burn out. Sabbath living celebrates what is beautiful and sacred. Sabbath living restores our souls because it restores our relationship with God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Each week I want to suggest a Sabbath practice. It will be something that everyone can try during the week. These practices will not require an enormous amount of time. These practices will invite us to be intentional about our Sabbath living.

Candle lighting is part of Sabbath time. The traditional Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday and the Christian Sabbath with morning worship on Sunday. In both, Sabbath time begins with the lighting of candles. When the candles are lighted, the stopping truly begins. For us, the lighting of the candle acknowledges the resurrected presence of Jesus Christ in our midst. (Light candle on Communion Table.)

This week I invite you to light a candle. Light one every day if it is possible. Light it at a mealtime or before a prayer time or at anytime during your day. And when you light it, breathe. Inhale the energy and joy of life and exhale peace and tranquility and rest. Give thanks for the gift of Jesus, the light of the world, in your life. Renew and restore your relationship with him by simply taking Sabbath time to light a candle.

Sabbath living. May we all find ways to simply "be" this summer. And may we find encouragement and refreshment and inspiration as we restore and return home to the God who created us and who loves us and graces our lives now and for eternity. So be it. Alleluia. Amen.